Jacques d’Amboise (1934 - )
by Kirsten Wilkinson

Jacques d’Amboise became the poster child for the athletic and good-natured dancer, altering American perceptions of male stereotypes and their roles in ballet. Born Joseph Jacques Ahearn in Dedham, Massachusetts, d’Amboise was encouraged by his mother to revert to her maiden name, thinking it made him sound more aristocratic and European, and hence more likely to be accepted in the arts world. Ironically, d’Amboise became known not only for his classical ballet style, but his pure athletic physique and boy-next-door charm; his French name was somewhat at odds with his all-American image. He began his training with the School of American Ballet in 1942. At a young age he also trained with Madame Seda, a well-respected Armenian Ballerina who also taught Leo Danielian. In 1948, New York City Ballet was launched, completing Lincoln Kirstein’s and George Balanchine’s vision for a school and company. A year later, d’Amboise became the first male virtuoso to come from the company’s own school, joining NYCB at the age of 15.

After his first principle role as Tristram in Fredrick Ashton’s Picnic at Tintagel (1952), d’Amboise found himself being heralded as George Balanchine’s “protégé;” Balanchine subsequently created over 24 roles for him at New York City Ballet. Dubbed the “definitive Apollo” while dancing the title role in Balanchine’s Apollo in 1957, he was praised for his rawness and emotion as well as his complete transformation from boy to man during his performance. His portrayal resurrected this 1928 work through the eyes of a new audience, making him the first American male superstar of the post-World War II era. In his memoir, I was a Dancer, d’Amboise talks with awe about working directly with not only George Balanchine (1904-1983), but also Lincoln Kirstein (1907-1996) and Igor Stravinsky during this time in his career.

His virile interpretations of such roles as Mac in the revival of Lew Christensen’s Filling Station (1953) and one of the cowboys in Balanchine’s Western Symphony (1954), led to a short but exciting film career. Probably best know as Ephraim in Seven Brides for Seven Brothers (1954) with choreography by Michael Kidd (1915-2007), and the Starlight Carnival Barker in Carousel (1956), d’Amboise also had a role in the film The Best Things in Life are Free, which highlighted his expansive dancing and partnering skills. D’Amboise remembers in his memoir, “People said, ‘You could be the next Gene Kelly; he’s getting old.’ I didn’t know if I could act, but I knew I could be a great ballet dancer, and Balanchine put out the carpet for me. Ballet became the ocean I swam in for the next 30 years.”

His contract required him to receive special permission from Balanchine to appear in these films, and also ensured that d’Amboise would return to New York City Ballet. He continued with the company in virtuoso roles, over 20 of them created for him by Balanchine, in ballets like Stars and Stripes (1958), Episodes (1959), Raymonda Variations (1961), Movements for the Piano and Orchestra (1963), Meditations (1963), Brahams-Schoenberg Quartet (1966), Jewels (1967), Who Cares? (1970), Union Jack (1976), and Robert Schumann’s “Davidsbundlertanze” (1980). He was known as a natural and strong dancer as well as a wonderful partner, having partnered with Suzanne Farrell (1945-) and Maria Tallchief most notably during his career. D’Amboise retired from New York City Ballet in 1983.

However, his retirement as a professional dancer did not mean his retirement from the field of dance. In 1976, while still a principal dancer with NYCB, d’Amboise founded the National Dance Institute, an

1 “I was a Dancer”
organization focusing on exposing public school children to dance. The program often combines music and art with broader studies of histories, cultures and literature, presenting an inimitable and all-embracing performing arts experience. To date, his work in dance education has influenced over 2 million children with his model program. And his program knows no boundaries, having partnered with a number of schools designed for the visually and hearing impaired. Having grown up in a low-income family in Washington Heights, New York City, d’Amboise knows first hand the places an arts education can take children no matter their culture or class. His inspiration concerning this endeavor came from his firm belief that “the arts have a unique power to engage and motivate individuals towards excellence.”

“The arts open your heart and mind to possibilities that are limitless. They are pathways that touch upon our brains and emotions and bring sustenance to imagination. Human beings’ greatest form of communication, they walk in tandem with science and play, and best describe what it is to be human,” D’Amboise once stated. About his teaching Howard Gardner, the Director of Harvard University Graduate School of Education, professed, “They say you can see the universe in a flower. In one hour, teaching a jig to a motley crew of students of all ages, Jacques d’Amboise lays bare the essence of all good education: discipline, effort, beauty, struggle, joy. In the process, he opens up a universe of possibilities for all who participate and reveals why an education in the arts must be the birthright of every human being.”

Even though his film career did not make him the next Gene Kelly, d’Amboise took his knowledge and experience with motion pictures to promote a new level of dance exposure for the American public, directing, choreographing and writing the films Event of the Year (1981), Fifth Position (1983), and He Makes Me Feel Like Dancin’ (1984), the last of which won an Academy Award, six Emmy Awards, a Peabody Award, a Golden Cine, and the National Education Association Award for Advancement of Learning through Broadcasting. D’Amboise approaches his directing and teaching similarly to the way he approached his first choreographic works with the New York City Ballet, which were followed by roughly 20 commissioned works in his career. His first choreographic work came in 1960 when he was assigned the Uruguay section in the production of Panamerica, and he continued to choreograph pieces for New York City Ballet including The Chase (1963), Quatour (1964), Irish Fantasy (1964) with music by Camille Saint-Saens, Tchaikovsky Suite No.2 (1969), and Celebration (1983) with music by Felix Mendelssohn. He strives to identify and work with young dancers who have star potential. While motivated by the all-inclusive philosophy that everyone deserves the opportunity to experience and learn dance, d’Amboise has traveled the world looking for gifted young dancers in some of the most remote places (Siberia, Ethiopia, and Nepal to name a few). He was instrumental in bringing Suzanne Farrell and Kyra Nichols to Balanchine’s attention, jump-starting their professional careers.

Frequently dubbed a “dance humanitarian,” d’Amboise continues to push the boundaries of how Americans expose themselves and their children to dance, breaking the stereotype of the American male dancer. In 1999, at nearly 65 years old, he started a seven-month, 2,157-mile trek on the Appalachian Trail to raise money for the National Dance Institute. Along the way while hiking d’Amboise taught a pre-choreographed Trail Dance to fellow hikers willing to learn, asking them in turn to teach...
it to others and pass it along. This fundraising event was filmed as a documentary by director John Avildsen.

Ever the dancer, d’Amboise continues to write about his wealth of technique and movement philosophy expertise. His belief in the mind-body connection among dancers is a theme he has carried during his entire career. An advocate of rigorous rehearsals, he was known for figuring out all the factors of the choreography and their relation to his own body before taking the stage in performance. Rehearsing a piece at heightened speed or extremely slow; moving through the piece in his mind while remaining perfectly still on stage; over-exaggerating movements and reversing the effect to keep his movements constrained, were all part of this attempt to perfect his performance quality for each new audience. When discussing dance, d’Amboise speaks of the pure joy and delight of the field. His essential nature as a performer expresses pleasure through dancing not only for himself, but for his audience as well. “He could execute the most demanding Balanchine combination with a debonair freedom that banished all thought of exhibitionism.”

Jacques d’Amboise has been a driving force behind dance in every possible aspect, from his contributions as a young soloist who singlehandedly defined the handsome, blithe, and vigorous American male dancer to his continued efforts in arts education. “Dance is the most immediate and accessible of the arts because it involves your own body. When you learn to move your body on a note of music, it’s exciting. You have taken control of your body and, by learning to do that, you discover that you can take control of your life.”

His legacy in dance has also been extended through his family. In 1956 d’Amboise married late NYCB dancer and photographer Carolyn George. Together they had four children; George, Christopher, and twin girls Catherine and Charlotte. Christopher went on to become the artistic director of the Pennsylvania Ballet and Charlotte has performed in many Broadway productions. D’Amboise was also the recipient of countless awards and honorary degrees, including The American Academy of Arts & Sciences (2007); The Mayor’s Award for Arts & Culture (2004); Honorary Doctorate of Fine Arts at the Juilliard School (2000); The Dance Magazine Award (1999); The National Medal of Arts (1998); The Kennedy Center Honors (1995); a 1990 MacArthur Fellowship, and The Capezio Award (1990). A full list of d’Amboise’s honors and awards for artistic excellence and humanitarian contributions is available on the website of the National Dance Foundation.

Kirsten Wilkinson holds a BA in Dance and Modern Performance from the University of Colorado at Boulder and an MA in Dance and Research from American University in Washington DC. Kirsten has worked within the not-for-profit field of dance in various capacities, and is currently a project associate at the Dance Heritage Coalition, where she received consecutive fellowships in 2005 and 2006. Kirsten is also a Dance Archivist at the Library of Congress within the Music Division. Besides her passion for dance preservation and documentation, Kirsten is also a professional dancer and instructor. She is Artistic Director of her own contemporary dance company, KWdance, and has performed and presented original choreography around the world, as well as lecturing around the country about topics in Dance Preservation, Dance Theory and Dance History. Kirsten is
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